

Nan Appleby, waiting for the kettle to boil in the kitchen of her fifth-floor flat, observed the signs of weather. The sky was a Turner palette of brooding colour. A storm looked to be brewing. Nan liked storms. She liked it that so far – but who could say for how long? – the weather still eluded the creeping control of humankind. Outside, the tops of the trees, which were at a level with her window, lifted and fell and then lifted again, heralding the storm. In the oiled-wool fisherman’s socks she wore for slippers Nan carried her mug of tea back to bed and opened her laptop.

Peace of Mind Funeral Planning, she read with a sense of pleasant expectation. *Act Now to Spare Your Loved Ones the Anguish of Rising Funeral Costs*.

Nan was engaged in her favourite occupation: researching her own funeral. Only the other day she had come across a tempting possibility, a firm offering a cut-price casket of Norfolk reed – a material that usually commanded a price that was high even in the exorbitant market of funeral services – and she was about to scroll through her search history to recover the details.

On that same morning at a later hour Blanche Carrington woke in her comfortable mansion flat to an unlocatable sense of despair. The day, she divined, without bothering to go to the window, was an accomplice to this mood. The

bedroom felt chilly – the boiler had given out and the man had not called to see to it as he had promised. Behind the heavy curtains she heard the thin wail of a wind get up and – memory broke rudely in – all this only went to emphasise the misery induced by the dreadful row she had had with her son. Her only son, Dominic, the light of her life, as she had once held him.

The faint whining sound outside seemed to bind her to these dark thoughts. Unwilling to leave the insulation of the down-filled duvet, Blanche turned on the bedside radio.

Storm Christina, she heard, was moving south and motorists were recommended not to undertake needless journeys. Well, she wasn't going to make any journey if she could help it. She would quite happily stay where she was in bed for the rest of the year, for the rest of her life if it came to that.

Minna Dyer woke to the sound of rain making a rousing kettledrum of the roof of the shepherd's hut that stood in Frank Fairbody's smallholding and sighed contentedly. She especially liked it when it rained. The hut was cosy with her newly installed stove and she had banked up the coals so they would smoulder overnight. The wilder the weather outside, the more she enjoyed her snug cocoon. She leant down from her bunk bed to fish up the book she had set aside the night before. A long read but, she had been assured by the nice volunteer at her local library, a worthwhile one. She would finish the chapter she had started last night and then get cracking on the doll's dress.

Summer Term

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It was Nan's day for collecting her grandson, Billy, from school. The storm had swept in splendidly while she was checking out the details of a willow coffin advertised as fashioned to fit around the living form.

Many of our satisfied clients the blurb ran take home our lovely caskets and decorate them in their own unique and personal style so family and friends can become acquainted with their loved one's chosen end-of-life journey.

There were photos of caskets stuffed with flowers – artificial ones, Nan judged: detergent-white lilies, electric-blue delphiniums and egg-yolk daffodils all mixed together without regard to season in shades that cheated nature's own. One of the featured pictures had a casket's intended content lying in an imitation of repose with a smug would-be-seraphic smile.

Now in raincoat and wellingtons, Nan waited with the assorted mothers, fathers, grandparents, the odd nanny, for the children of St Monica's Primary to come out.

They were let loose according to a system intended to allow one lot of chattering children to disperse before the onset of another wave. Billy didn't appear with the rest of Year 5, who straggled out swapping sweets and jokes or cheerfully shoving each other, apparently oblivious to the rain.

Nan enquired of a boy with a plump rosy face, ‘Laurence, have you seen Billy?’

‘He’s been kept in.’

‘What for?’

‘For swearing at Josie Smith.’

Oh Lord, Nan thought. ‘What did he say, do you know, Laurence?’

The boy looked at her, sizing up her resilience. ‘He called her an effing little shit – only,’ he added tactfully, ‘it wasn’t “effing” he said.’

‘Oh Lord,’ Nan said, aloud this time. ‘I suppose I’d best go and brave Miss Green.’

Laurence looked sympathetic. ‘She’s in a cross mood.’

‘Who can blame her? Thank you, Laurence, wish me luck.’

Nan met Miss Green with Billy in the corridor.

‘Mrs Appleby, I’m afraid I am having to take Billy to Miss Rainwright’s office again.’

‘I’m so sorry, Miss Green. What is it this time?’ Nan shot a glance at her grandson, who, mulish, was examining the floor.

Miss Green frowned. Her healthy young face was creased with fatigue. It must be hell, Nan thought, coping with a class of nine- to ten-year-olds with all the cuts to the budget and no assistant. ‘I’m afraid Billy used language.’

Billy’s mule expression turned to blaze. ‘Josie Smith said I was on the spectrum.’

Nan looked enquiringly at Miss Green, who looked embarrassed and said, ‘Josie has also been reprimanded. And I’ve asked to speak to her parents.’

‘Well, now’ – Nan sensed that the teacher was keen to be

free of this nuisance – ‘Billy shouldn’t swear of course but perhaps with the provocation . . .? I’ll give him a telling-off worse than Miss Rainwright’s, I can promise you that.’

Miss Green had a hair appointment and was anxious to be off. ‘Billy, if it happens again then you will not be coming on the field trip. Is that quite clear?’

Billy examined his shoes. ‘Yes, Miss Green.’

‘Well, run along with your nan.’

‘She’s not my nan,’ Billy said. ‘She’s just “Nan”,’ but his teacher, relieved of the burden of imposing discipline, had already hurried out of earshot.

Nan looked at her grandson, who said, ‘Anyway, I don’t want to go on a stupid field trip.’

‘That’s as may be but right now you can have a quick slap and then come back to mine and no more said or we can go back to yours and you can write a letter of apology to that girl.’

‘Smacking’s illegal,’ Billy said. ‘You could go to prison.’

‘Ah, but who’s to tell?’ Nan asked. It was not that she was in favour of corporal punishment but she heartily disliked the modern habit of subjecting children to prolonged reproach or dismal lectures. ‘It’d be your word against mine.’

This was a well-rehearsed dispute and both were familiar with the terms.

Billy considered. ‘Is there cake at yours?’

‘Mr Kipling and some Battenberg.’

‘I don’t like Battenberg.’

‘Suit yourself,’ Nan said. ‘Back at yours it’ll be oatcakes and almond butter. What’s that little girl’s name again?’

Billy settled for a token slap on the back of his calves.

They walked briskly back to Nan's flat, past 'Geraldine's' the corner shop, still valiantly holding its own against the vastly superior, in terms of stock, supermarkets. Although she generally shopped from the market in the Portobello, Nan made a point of buying the odd thing she needed from the struggling local shops. Now she bought a loaf of sliced white and a tin of baked beans and agreed with Geraldine that outside it was perishing. One of her reasons for patronising the local shops was that there, as with the market-stall holders, one could hold a genuine conversation.

After chatting with Geraldine Nan offered to buy Billy a traffic-light lolly. 'That's a reward for making up your own mind, not for the slap,' she explained. 'All ways of life have a cost,' she added. She was aware that for the present this wisdom would mean little but she hoped it might lie dormant in her grandson's mind. It was a useful observation. One she had learned from her own grandmother.

Back at Nan's flat Billy inspected the weather house which hung in Nan's hall. For as long as he could remember the inhabitants had been out of sync with the weather. True to form, the lady with her red sunhat was out, which by rights should indicate sunny weather. Outside, rain like a hail of knives had joined forces with the wind howling round the flats. 'Your weather house still isn't working,' he called to Nan, who was opening the tin of beans in the kitchen.

'Don't go fiddling with it, you'll upset their balance – you know they're used to it that way.'

Billy went to the bedroom and opened his grandmother's laptop. He took an interest in her search for the perfect

send-off and was keen to discover the latest candidates for her funeral. He had once mentioned his grandmother's preoccupation to his mother but she had warned him off the subject, saying that it was 'morbid' and that he must not think about his grandmother's death, which would be a long time off. This was in spite of an awareness of her son's unusual interest in naked truths. His mother, terrorised by any threat to her vision of life, attempted to curtail this trait much as she attempted to discourage his taste for unwholesome foods.

Nan came through to the bedroom and found Billy absorbed in the details of the 'take-home, tailored-to-fit all-natural willow casket'.

'This one's cool,' he decided.

'I was thinking of going to take a look next Saturday. Your beans are ready. Milk or tea? I've just brewed a pot.'

Billy said he'd have tea and could he go with her to view the casket.

'If your mother says you can. I'd be glad of your opinion.'

They ate beans on toast at the gate-leg mahogany table in Nan's snug sitting room. Billy ladled three spoons of sugar into his tea.

'Are you doing that to spite your mother or because you really like it?'

Billy considered. 'Don't know.'

'You should think about it. If you like it, all well and good. If it's to get at your mum, you're doing yourself more harm than you're doing her. There's rebelling and there's revolting.'

'Revolting? Like fish pie?'

‘Different meaning, or it’s come to have. You can turn against things for the sake of it, that’s rebellion, or because you see them as wrong, that’s revolt.’ *The two conditions look alike*, she reminded herself but said, ‘It looks the same but it’s all the difference in the world.’

‘How?’ he asked, truly interested and sure of a real reply, for his grandmother understood his urgent need to get to the bottom of things.

Nan thought, then said, ‘One’s reaction, the other’s action. You taking all that sugar because your mother doesn’t like you to is reaction; it takes no account of what you like or don’t like yourself.’

Billy sipped his tea. ‘Would I like it without sugar?’ he enquired.

His small white triangular face with the peat-dark eyes looked so ardent, so utterly honest and trusting, that she leant across and kissed his forehead. ‘You won’t know till you’ve tried, pet.’

Her heart ablaze with love for him, she watched as he went to the kitchen and fetched a mug and poured himself fresh tea. Adding only milk, he sipped it cautiously. ‘I think I do prefer it with sugar.’ But he put in a single spoonful, stirring it extra to extract all the sweetness. ‘Can we look through the funerals?’ he asked when he had eaten his beans.

‘No Mr Kipling?’

He looked a mite anxious and she said, ‘Listen, I’m not saying liking sweet things is wrong. Just be sure why you are choosing them.’

‘Then I’ll have one.’

She got up to fetch the tin from the kitchen. ‘A little of

what you fancy does you good. Now once you've eaten that and helped with the dishes we can check out the coffins. There's another's caught my eye that comes in parts they say'll double up to use as a bookcase beforehand, which could come in handy.'

Blanche was summoned from the padded security of her bed by the persistent ringing of her landline. She stumbled to it, praying that it was her son calling to apologise. No such luck. Only her cleaner, Marissa, ringing to say she was not able to come tomorrow as she was ‘bleeding’.

‘Oh dear. What sort of “bleeding”, Marissa?’

‘I think maybe a miscarriage. My boyfriend will take me to the hospital.’

‘I’m so sorry, Marissa. I didn’t realise you were pregnant.’

‘I did not realise either. But it happens.’

Although Blanche did not especially like her cleaner this felt like a further dereliction. Not only would there be no company tomorrow but the solicitous boyfriend – and the pregnancy, miscarried or otherwise – emphasised her own isolation. Her closest friend, Maggie, was away on one of her singles cruises, hunting, as Blanche put it, more or less humorously, for a man.

‘Not any man!’ Maggie had objected, but Blanche’s guess was that for Maggie any man was better than none. She herself, she liked to think, had better taste. Or was more fearful, as Maggie had hinted. Certainly, since the death of Dominic’s father she had been out only once on what might be described as a date.

The date had been with a former colleague of her dead

husband's – a seemingly decent man who had also recently lost his spouse. She had dressed carefully, with some excitement, for the dinner he had proposed at a well-reviewed Italian restaurant. The dinner had seemed to pass off well – he had been courteous and amiable and had asked just enough questions to register a lively interest in her and not too many to seem to presume. Neither of them had drunk more than a couple of glasses of wine. What then, had prompted him to make that sudden and crude pass as he dropped her in his car outside her flat? A quite disgusting pass which involved grabbing her hand and laying it – no, clamping it, rather – on his bulging flies.

She had not liked to tell even Maggie about it. Maggie would laugh or suggest that she should have hit the bastard hard where it hurt. She had been too appalled at the time to do more than disentangle her hand and flee from the car with all speed. He had sent her a nasty text too, implying she had led him on. The experience had so disturbed her that she was loath to risk any further assignations and had determined henceforth to settle all her love and devotion on Kitty and Harry, her grandchildren. Especially on Kitty, her most beloved.

At the thought of the children her eyes filled again with tears.

'You shan't be seeing them again,' Dominic had said, his voice colder than an Arctic floe. Terrible words. Terrible Dominic. Terrible *terrible* Tina, for surely it was Tina, her daughter-in-law, who was behind all this.

Still trembling with rage and misery, Blanche began to dress. She dressed with none of her usual care, pulling out

drawers savagely, throwing on the first dress to hand from the wardrobe, and without any chosen purpose decided to go out. There were things she needed, in so far as she needed anything other than the recovered certainty of seeing her grandchildren. But she could at least stock up on alcohol. Wine and possibly gin or brandy or both. Whisky, even. She disliked whisky but believed it might be palatable with ginger. If her son was going to accuse her of being a drunk, well then, she would become a drunk. The idea was a boost to her spirits, if a temporary one. That was it – she would become a drunk. Then they would see what bad behaviour was really like.

In the High Street, almost bowled over by the onslaught of a viciously rain-charged wind, she passed Boots and thought to buy paracetamol. If she was going to get drunk she would need it.

The entrance to Boots in Kensington High Street is given over to the various cosmetic houses and their latest eye-catching products. As Blanche wandered through the store her eye was caught by a colourful display of lipsticks. She stopped to examine these, pulling out some testers to try out on her wrist. Without premeditation, she found that rather than returning them to their places in the stand she had slipped them into her pocket. She looked round furtively. No assistant was in sight. A selection of eye shadows in the same range was also displayed. Artfully, she pocketed a couple, moving seamlessly on towards the pharmacy at the back of the store.

Heart pounding, for never in her life before had she stolen more than a hotel pencil, she bought paracetamol and made to hurry out of the shop. But even as she sped

she passed the stand of another cosmetic house, attended by no assistant, where expensive-looking gold-capped tubes of cream were displayed. Before she had consciously registered what she was doing two tubes had slid into her other pocket and she was outside on the pavement breathing hard.

She patted her pockets. The coat was long and the pockets capacious. There appeared to be no betraying signs. Nevertheless, she took herself off to the Ladies' in nearby Marks and Spencer to examine the spoils: two lipstick testers, Geranium and Black Hibiscus; two eye shadows, Lichen and Birch Bark; and two tubes of a night cream costing – here she felt a little dizzy – £75 apiece. She could feel sweat began to drip down her back as she deposited the eye shadows and the night creams in her handbag, wrapped the lipstick testers in a paper towel and thrust them deep in the waste bin.

Downstairs in the M&S food hall she collected in her trolley two bottles of red wine, two of white, a large bottle of gin and one of White Horse whisky. To this she added a pack of tonics, some dry ginger and two giant bags of popcorn. Passing the shelves of nuts, she slid a packet of smoked almonds and another of salted pistachios into her pocket. More aware this time of the risk she was taking, she still felt powerless to stop. The coat pockets seemed to have taken on an imperative all their own.

Blanche hurried home sweating badly despite the freezing wind, her hands cut by the plastic bags bearing the weight of her supplies. Back in her flat she didn't wait to take off her coat before opening the gin and pouring a hefty slug into a glass. As she attempted to open the tonic

tin the pull came away in her hand. Swearing loudly, she dashed the unopened tin to the floor and knocked back the neat gin. With that down her she poured herself another slug, hacked a hole with a knife in the stubborn tonic tin, walked back to the bedroom, shaking off her shoes and dropping her coat on the floor, then stripping off her tights and dress, retreated back to bed with her drink, the popcorn and her laptop.

She opened the laptop to find an email from some health guru. *Right now, your body is like an apple, sliced open and sitting in the open air about to deteriorate.*

‘Oh great!’ Blanche said aloud. ‘Bloody bloody great!’ Violently, she shoved the laptop aside, wriggled down and pulled the duvet tight around her.

Before rising that morning Minna Dyer had read the opening pages of *Swann's Way*. She had just embarked on a course of reading French literature. For the last three and a half years she had been doing the Russians: Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Pasternak, Turgenev and Chekhov. She was no judge, but Tolstoy she reckoned could do with some editing. Dostoyevsky struck her as gloomy and she preferred the film of *Dr Zhivago* to Pasternak's rather heavy-handed story. Turgenev was the one she liked best. Chekhov too. She was captivated by his stories.

But Proust – there was a challenge. Even longer than *War and Peace*, which with all the battles and the Russian names she had found tough enough going. So far Proust had kept her attention with the scenes of his childhood. It reminded her of her own childhood and how she had waited, forcing herself to stay awake, for her mother, with her scent of sweet violets and softly powdered face, to steal in and kiss her goodnight. Her trusting mother had supposed her fast asleep on these occasions. She wasn't a deceitful child, quite the reverse, but she had been good at acting sleep.

Minna climbed out of her bunk and pulled on tracksuit trousers under her long shirt, which doubled as a day shirt. Over this she pulled a seaman's jersey and knotted round her neck, for a bit of colour, a red scarf. She made

tea and boiled herself a duck egg, gift of Frank, in whose grounds her shepherd's hut stood free of rent. She and Frank went way back. They traded assets: she cleaned for him and he helped with any maintenance job and gave her eggs if his ducks or hens were laying. Above all they gave each other mutual support.

Over breakfast Minna did the previous day's *Guardian* crossword. She got the crossword online at the library, where she also printed it out. There was one clue that escaped her: something to do with a French winter. Maybe Proust would help.

Her breakfast finished and the crossword still incomplete, Minna set it aside and reached for the little frock she was sewing for Patsy Doll, cut from the material of an outgrown school uniform. Minna planned to give the doll a smart blue blazer too so she would be a miniature version of a schoolgirl. Minna put on her glasses, threaded the needle, turned on the radio and began to sew.

She had finished the frock, taken her daily walk and her mind was on the tip of solving the elusive crossword clue when there was a faint rap at the hut door and a girl with her hair in plaits and a freckled face came in.

'Rosie darling – squash or milk?'

'Milk, please. Is Patsy's dress ready?'

'All done and dusted. Look.' Minna presented the doll for inspection.

Rose examined her. 'She hasn't got pants.'

'I'll see to those. No one but you'll know.'

'She'll know.'

'True enough, but we shan't take her out till she's modest.'

‘I’ll make her some for now. Can I use your scissors, please, Minna?’

Once Patsy had been made modest Rose drank her milk and ate a Rich Tea biscuit while Minna completed the crossword.

‘It’s “hierarchy”. Of course. Silly me.’

‘What’s “*hierthingy*”?’

‘Like at school where Year 5 is higher than Year 4, and Year 4 is higher than Year 3.’

Rose nodded, not really understanding. She knew Minna’s crossword mattered to her and had asked out of a sense of good manners. ‘Can we play Gin Rummy?’

‘Of course. I’ll get the cards.’

Gin Rummy was a game that the more sophisticated toys joined them in. Some of them cheated. The small pink unicorn was especially bad that way.

‘Rainbow’s cheating,’ one of the elderly rabbits complained.

‘Rainbow! I’ll put you in the drawer if you cheat,’ Rose reproved.

Several of the toys were accomplished card players and indeed altogether they were a skilled and lively crew. They put on plays, sang, danced and went in for various sports and hobbies. When Minna and Rose had been first told about the film *Toy Story* they had been surprised that the idea of toys with an inner life was considered original and amusing.

‘My toys are always like that, only they’re like it when I’m there,’ Rose had explained to a kindly relative.

‘She’s fanciful,’ her mother had said. ‘Always had a fertile imagination, haven’t you, Rosie?’

Over the years, Rose had gradually transported the most cherished of her toys to Minna's hut. This was to deal with the clearings. Her mother sporadically instituted a clearing out of what she considered an overpopulation of toys and these raids sometimes took place behind Rose's back.

Minna was not Rose's grandmother. She was in fact no relation to her at all. Minna had no children of her own but got on with children more easily than those who, through having them, might have been expected to understand them better. It sometimes seemed to Minna that the act of conceiving and bearing children in some mysterious way lobotomised the recollection of the state of being a child and implanted instead a whole new set of behaviours. Over the years Minna had acquired the trust and friendship of many children. But no attachment went as deep as hers to Rose.

It was not that she had not known other loves. She had loved her gentle, talcum-powder-smelling mother with a depth of feeling that she recognised in Marcel Proust. She had loved her brother, Miles, who had died before he reached his teens. And she had loved, loved still, and with a whole heart, John Carpenter. Without question she loved Rose. But it was not the love that made her feeling for Rose unique; it was the simple certainty without effort or strain or any need to think of knowing and being known. She *knew* Rose: without being told, she felt how Rose was feeling, what she did or did not mind, how her mind and her heart worked, were working.

Rose and Minna met when Minna was a teaching assistant at Rose's school. Before Minna retired she had started an after-school book club and it was through this that she

had really got to know Rose. The book club had dwindled finally to the two of them, when Minna chose *The Princess and the Goblin* as the next story to read. All in the club but Rose had voted with their feet but Rose had wonderfully, in just the way Minna had, grasped the story's beauty – although 'grasped' was perhaps not what you did with a story which revealed with such quiet tact the deep and mysterious other world which lies for those with eyes to see within our own. It seemed to Minna a story as fine and supple and strong as the spider's web the grandmother with the silver hair spins for the princess to keep by her in order to find her way through the dark terrors of the goblin terrain. And she was overjoyed to find in Rose someone who shared her vision.

It was after this that Rose had got in the way of visiting Minna, whose shepherd's hut, on Frank Fairbody's small-holding, stood across the field by her house.

As a child, Minna had not been especially interested in reading. She wasn't what was then bluntly referred to as 'backward'. She could grasp the meaning of words and follow a storyline. The verdict on her reading had been 'average' and 'average' was the general assessment of her throughout her school years. It was not an era in which many children went on to university and it would never have occurred to Minna that she might.

She left school at sixteen and having grown up loving her mother's sweet-scented aura took a job serving at a local chemist's. Thereafter she took a number of jobs, all fairly dull but none so dull that she was tempted to pass any free time in reading. And that was the straightforward unremarkable progress of her life until she met John Carpenter.

It was not that John was any great reader either. He had read more than Minna but such books as he read tended to be political and non-fiction. So it wasn't John's influence on her tastes that brought about this seismic shift in her life. Rather it was the fact of his removal.

For after having made the monumental effort of leaving his wife to set out on a brave new life with Minna, John had resiled. And after some desperate shilly-shallying he had returned to his wife's triumphant embrace and swiftly fathered two children so there could be no backsliding.

The effect on Minna was as if she had been in a near-fatal accident. Not only her heart – which as everyone knows is liable to a physical pain in sympathy with the emotional kind – but her head, back, limbs, fingers, toes all screamed in agony for her loss.

She had not been bitter. It had cut too deep for that. She had not at first even been suicidal (that would come later). She was what people, ignorant of the real implications of the word, will lightly claim to be – shattered. Her heart, her mind, her very soul seemed to have been smashed into tiny, irreparable fragments.

It took years for her to recover. (It is possible that she never did quite.) And it was not for trying remedies: alcohol, drugs, magic charms, sex, diets, meditation and in a last-ditch effort even Anglicanism. Nothing worked. She was like a woman gone overboard in a wide and dangerous sea, who, finally hopeless of rescue and fatally resigning herself to unconsciousness, awakes to find she has been washed ashore on a richly fertile island, undiscovered and full of new promise.

Because in the nick of time Minna found reading.

4

Nan called round to her daughter-in-law's to collect Billy to take him with her to inspect the latest candidate for her coffin. She had advised him not to tell his mother the purpose of the trip.

Nan was on a mission to teach Billy how to lie. 'It's not that I want you to deceive,' she had explained. 'It's for self-protection. Sometimes you have to say or do things to look after yourself. And remember, you are the only person truly entrusted to care for yourself. Others will tell you otherwise but in the end it's all down to you.'

Billy had listened without comment to this and to connected advice: 'The important thing, Bill, is to know you're doing it. Most people lie to themselves more than anything. That's the royal road to ruin' and 'If you're going to lie the first rule is don't be found out.'

The young Nan had early recognised that much of what passes for human relationship is really a form of blackmail. Her Scottish grandmother, who had never lapsed into the frailty of old age, had been an example to her. All but bald, certainly toothless but with her marbles almost shockingly intact, she had commanded her life right up to the point of leaving it, which she had done with exemplary timing on the cusp of a new year, in the middle of 'Auld Lang Syne'. Her grandmother had brought up her three children single-handed after her young husband was drowned while helping